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### Book Review: Mary Beth Norton. In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692

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## 192 Book Reviews

Mary Beth Norton. *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

*In the Devil's Snare* explores the realm of the late 17th Century in which New England was turned upside down from accusations of witchcraft, Indian wars, and strange phenomenon. Mary Beth Norton draws from primary documents to expound on typical New England society, the conflicts among the masses, the examination of accused witches, and their resolves.

Norton places importance on attitudes towards women and how Salem politics eventually led to bewitchment of women and men. What is noted is the first-reported witchcraft activity from Samuel Parris, a reverend of Salem Village, Massachusetts, whose daughters began to experience fits of unusual behavior in 1691-1692. This behavior was said to have been illustrated by Parris's slave Tituba who had recited stories of voodoo and witchcraft to the young girls. After this scores of women and girls were being accused of afflicting harm on innocent citizens and witnessing apparitions of witches (3). Word spread throughout Salem Village through friends and neighbors, as there were no newspapers in circulation at the time. To aid understanding of the trials, inference is used for thoughts or perceived actions throughout the book (6).

The females accused resided in Salem Village and Andover and ranged "in age from eleven to twenty, several of them servants" (4). They performed tasks such as cooking and doing laundry, but there was a drawback. The domestic work of 17th century women gave men an outlet for blame if something went wrong on a family's property. For instance, if livestock or children suddenly became ill, women were automatically at fault but would not be silent with their cries of innocence (6). Thus women could be "more malicious...and full of revenge," enabling them to "fit instruments of the Divell [sic]" (32). The story of Eve demonstrates why women were deemed more susceptible to Satan's constraints and forced the afflicted to torture victims by sometimes violent means. While these theologies and events took place in other parts of New England, what set Massachusetts apart is the Indian wars that took place and English responses to these conflicts that influenced the witchcraft crisis.

Norton's main theme is presented chronologically beginning with King Phillip's War (1675-1678). The struggle for land and missionizing Christians set off repercussions for Wabanaki peoples that led to bloodshed from both Native Americans and English settlers (83). The Wabanakis attacked villages in populous areas of New England, thus their actions and behavior did not go unnoticed.

The mention in confessions of accused witches of a "black man" ties witchcraft to the appearance of an Indian. "On numerous occasions seventeenth-century colonists employed the word 'black' to mean 'Indian.'" During Sarah Osborn's trial, a Massachusetts colonist, an apparition of "a thing like an indian [sic] all black" came to her (58).

Fear had risen “of the devil’s impending war against New England” (59). “The fear of Indians that pervaded the region thus included not just apprehensions of death or captivity but also of torture and dismemberment. In light of the perceived alliance between Satan and the Wabanakis, such suffused dread could easily have been vocalized in what became the commonplace description of the devil’s threats to ‘tear [the afflicted] to pieces’ if they do not comply with the demands” (136).

A second Indian war erupted in 1688, again caused by land disputes (94). What stunned New Englanders was the fall of heavily fortified Falmouth, which led residents to flee to other settlements and ultimately fight a war of attrition against the Wabanakis (110). Three years later, Wabanakis sacked York, Maine right after Parris’s daughters began having fits.

A larger portion of *In the Devil’s Snare* concentrates on the Native American influence on trials that ultimately executed 14 women and 5 men and heard 54 confessions (4). The interrogations “had a single purpose: to elicit a confession of guilt” (25). One magistrate, John Hathorne, asked the first accused witch, Sarah Good, “What evil spirit have you familiarity with?” His next question was, “Have you made no contract with the devil?” Sarah Good denied both of the questions, but confessions proved how intense and painful torture was on the victims (26). Bridget Bishop, a New England resident, was accused of witchcraft and afflicted women by striking them down and they mimicked the movements of her body which caused great pain (206).

Bishop also confessed to making victims sign their names to Satan’s book. The allusion to Satan’s book originated from Tituba’s tales and became “an object that, in many guises, was eventually to appear in numerous statements by both accusers and confessors” (52). One can assume Satan’s book symbolizes a score card Satan can use to keep track of whom to afflict and have afflicted, as well as prove the cunning power to Christians that Satan can override the graciousness of God.

Norton analyzes the role George Burroughs played in the entire affair. Burroughs was born in Virginia and settled as the minister for the church of Salem Village in 1680, making his occupation one for which people respected and followed him (123-5). He also preached in “Bla[ck] Poynt” in 1686 (129). Burroughs was “being Suspected for a confederacy with the devil in oppressing [sic] of Sundry about Salem.” Burroughs tormented a young woman named Ann Putnam Jr. and murdered his two wives along with some of his children. He appeared to Ann after he “grevously” [sic] tormented her by “futilely pressing her to write in his book” (149). This encounter parallels others’ accounts from women who Burroughs appeared to. During his trial, Abigail and Deliverance Hobbs, Sarah Churchwell, Mary Warren, and Bridget Bishop confessed to receiving threats from him and experienced physical harm (195).

Mary Warren’s testimony against Burroughs helped hammer the nail in the coffin. “After chocking her ‘almost to death,’ she revealed, Burroughs’s apparition ‘sound[ed] a Trumpett [sic] and Immediately I saw

severall [sic] com [sic] to him.” They had “readily responded to Burroughs’s signal, making it absolutely clear that he was their leader” (245-6). In addition, Burroughs “produced nothing but ‘*Tergiversations, Contradictions, and Falshoods*’ in his attempt to defend himself” (250). The judge sentenced Burroughs to hang, and he died ironically declaring himself innocent (256).

The last woman to be accused was in 1693 when Margaret Rule “described the devil as ‘*a short and Black Man,*’” and “suffered from pinches and pinpricks that left her black and blue, and contorted her body into strange shapes.” Her pastor claimed the spirits soon left her, saying, “*Go and the Devil go with you, we can do no more.*” There were then no more afflictions in New England (293).

The purpose of this book is to give readers a history of the Salem Witchcraft Trials and the explain factors that may have influenced the afflictions and confessions. Norton achieves this objective brilliantly and legitimately through many cited examples and gives readers the opportunity to reach into the minds of the people who survived (or did not survive) the conflict. In addition, Norton explores politics, religious aspects, and social aspects of the crisis. The religious aspects are interesting because each accused witch was asked to recite the Lord’s Prayer as a standing of innocence, and if they were not able to, they were pegged as guilty and claimed they were overcome by “these wicked ones” (171).

The organization makes the book easily legible, and the subject matter allows for clarity of arguments from intelligent research. The amount of research compliments the arguments and gives a wonderful overall picture of the witchcraft crisis.

*In the Devil’s Snare* is an important contribution to the field of women’s studies as well as 17th Century New England culture for future studies. This is the most complete and thorough account of the witchcraft crisis and is a highly recommended read, though mainly for adult audiences.

Tess Evans